DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 265 EA 021 920

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TITLE The Role of Accreditation and Program Quality Review in School Reform in California.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; *Accrediting Agencies; Credentials; *Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Evaluators; Institutional Evaluation; School Effectiveness; Self Evaluation (Groups)
IDENTIFIERS *California

ABSTRACT

As more public money is spent on educational reform, the issue of school accountability arises more often. California high schools have traditionally participated in an external validation process to gain accreditation from the regional commission, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Schools that receive compensatory funding are evaluated by the State Department of Education's Quality Review Process. Pursuing Excellence, a joint accreditation procedure for public high schools, has recently been established as part of the reform effort. The criteria of both agencies, WASC and the State Department of Education, are combined. Each agency maintains separate but mutually supportive criteria, and features a single visit to the school by one team instead of two separate visits by the state and the WASC commission. The joint process has three parts: the self-study (internal validation); the visit (external validation); and the followup. The effectiveness of the joint process depends upon maintaining a balance between external and internal validation measures. Unless an external and internal evaluation system based on a variety of assessment procedures is established, the results of California's school reforms will remain difficult to assess. (4 references) (LMI)

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THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION AND PROGRAM QUALITY REVIEW IN SCHOOL REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

SYMPOSIUM: Evaluating the Results of Educational Reform at the School Level: An International Perspective

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The Annual Meeting of the

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Boston, Massachusetts

April 18, 1990

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION AND PROGRAM REVIEW IN SCHOOL REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION

Driven by a concern that America's schools had lost their competitive edge when compared to such nations as Japan and West Germany, a movement developed over the past decade to make educational reform a national priority. George Bush pledged to be the "education President," and many gubenatorial and legislative candidates moved education to the top of their campaign platforms. Alliances have been formed between politicians, leaders of the business community, and educators, to facilitate moving the educational reform agenda.

Because education is a state responsibility in this country, most of the efforts for reform have originated at the state level. California, the most populous state representing 10% of the US population, is certainly no exception, having passed and implemented statewide educational reforms. The recognized leader of these efforts in California has been Bill Honig, State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Honig was elected to office in 1982 and re-elected in 1986 on a platform promoting major reform of the educational system in California.

THE ROAD TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

California is divided into over 1,000 local school districts. The diversity of the districts is startling. Los Angeles Unified School District with nearly 600,000 students sprawls over thousands of square miles in a densley populated urban area. This contrasts with the rural, isolated mountain communities whose school districts consist of a one room school house. The student population is equally diverse and rapidly becoming minority-majority.

In prior decades California had been looked to by other states as the trendsetter with regard to educational issues. But a lengthy controversy over how to equitably fund California's schools translated into a decade of financial neglect and a major decline in the quality of the educational system in the 1970s. The passage of Proposition 13 which restructured and limited property tax in the state eventually lead to a shift away from local funding for education toward a heavier reliance on state revenues. The perceived decline in the quality of education coupled with increased state financial reponsibility for education resulted in greatly increased state involvement in educational policy development. The stage was set for Bill Honig to propose his sweeping reforms.

In 1984, the California legislature passed the California Education Reform Act. Although the product of a broad based coalition of legislators, educators, the California Business Roundtable, teachers unions, and others, Bill Honig was clearly the orchestrator of the reform effort. Frequently at odds with fiscally conservative Republican Governor, George Deukmejian, Honig was still able to accomplish much of his agenda. Although extremely comprehensive

addressing issues ranging from credentialing and salary for teachers to the length of the school day and year, the primary focus was improvement in the educational program at the school site.

State model curriculum frameworks have been developed in all subject areas. A major emphasis has been on developing higher level thinking skills across all curricular areas. A major strategy has been interdisciplinary studies, linking social studies to language arts and literature, writing and reading across the curriculum, applying math and science to solve real problems. Cooperative as well as competitive learning constructs are encouraged, as are varied teaching strategies to assure meeting the diverse and changing needs of the state's student population.

If the content of the curriculum changes, so must the means of assessment. The state is now in the process of making major revisions in the California Assessment Program Tests. The subjects tested have been expanded to include science and social studies. The format and frequency of testing has also been changed.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Although it is widely accepted that evaluation and assessment are an integral part of the curriculum development process, it would be naive to ignore the added political motivation behind the assessment efforts. Not only has the state legislated these major educational reforms, but it has also increased the education budget significantly in order to finance the costly package. Anytime a significant amount of public money is expended, the issue of accountability arises.

Several provisions have been made to hold school districts accountable for improving the performance of local schools. One is the annual School Accountability Report Card which must address at least thirteen specific items:

*student achievement
*dropout rates
*expenditures per student
*reduction of class sizes and teaching loads
*teacher assignment outside area of competence
*instructional materials
*counseling and student support services
*substitute teachers
*safety, cleanliness, adequacy of school facilities
*teacher evaluation and opportunities for improvement
*classroom discipline and climate for learning
*teacher and staff training, curriculum development
*quality of school instruction and leardership

The list must be compared periodically to a model developed by a statewide committee. The report card is made available annually to parents, the board of education, and the State Department of Education.

Another accountability mechanism allows for the state to step in as trustee to administer a school or school district when it is deemed to be at risk. Currently the Oakland School District is operating under such an arrangement. Evidence of financial and ethical mismanagement as well as appallingly low student achievement led to the state's action.

Traditionally high schools in California and throughout the United States have participated in an external evaluation process to gain accrediattion through regional commissions. The region to which Californai belongs is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Featuring a self-study and school visitation, the accreditation process examines the quality of the school's edcuational program as experienced by students. Of equal importance is an examiniation of those factors designed to improve the school on a continuing basis. Eight criteria, ranging from philosophy to finance, are used to measure the success of both of these fundamental processes.

The visiting team is composed of practicing educators who come together for three and a half days for the visitation. Each member is trained during a workshop presented in two days. The chair of the visiting committee is a veteran of the visitation process and sets the organizational and working structure of the committee during the preparation for the visitation and the visit itself. The committee receives the self study in advance and makes preliminary recommendations and commendations which are adjusted after gathering additional information during the visitation. The team members observe classrooms, and interview faculty, staff, students, parents, and administrators of the school and the district. The team finalizes recommendations and commendations and recommends the term of accreditation, ranging from a full six-years to limited term requiring a return visit. The worst possible scenario is to deny accreditation. All recommendations must be addressed by the school prior to the next visitation, be it in six years or sooner if only limited accreditation is given.

Accreditation has until recently only applied to high schools. This practice is beginnig to spread to middle and junior high schools, but on a very limited basis.

Program Quality Review is an evaluation process utilized in California for those schools receiving compensatory funding. It includes all school levels, elementary through high school. These periodic reviews are based on criteria which are far more specific than those of accreditation. Not only is curriculum and instruction a focus, but also leadership, planning and decision making processes, school climate, etc. School programs are assessed against exemplary descriptors designed by the state. Compliance issues are also at stake because of the compensatory funding structures. The assessment is carried out by a visitation team which is usually headed by a member of the State Department of Education who works exclusively in the review process. Other team members are practicing educators who have short term training similar to accreditation team members.

ACCREDITATION AND PROGRAM QUALITY REVIEW AS A JOINT PROCESS

As a part of the reform effort in California, a Joint Procedure for Appraising the California Public High School has been established by the State Department of Education and the Accrediting Commission for Schools. High schools which receive compensatory funding can opt for the joint process thereby experiencing a single visit by one team as opposed to two separate visits by both the State and the Accreditating Commission. Any other high school may elect to participate in the process even if they do not receive compensatory funds. The criteria for both the Program Quality Review and Accreditation are juxtaposed guiding the self-study and school visitation process. The review process incorporates the major elements of curriculum reform recently undertaken in California. Particiular emphasis is placed on the issue of equity throuout the Program Quality Review Criteria. A critical element in the joint process is the development of an action plan to address any needed improvement in the educational program.

The four goals of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges/State Department of Education (WASC/SDE) Program Review Joint Process are:

GOAL 1 - Assuring a school and its public that the school has established and is meeeting its goals and objectives

The committee visit will assure that the education goals are appropriate, that conditions have been established to assure accomplishment of the goals, and that a process for continuous improvement of the program will occur through ongoing self-study and external support.

GOAL 2 - Improvement in the process of school renewal for the school

The committee visit will provide schools with accurate diagnostic information and recommendations to assist in planning program improvement. Additional benefits include training of the school staff in the self-study method which can then be utilized as a part of the school's management procedures. Furhtermore the team can provide data to state policy makers on issues of statewide concern.

GOAL 3 - Improvement in the instructional program

The committee visit will encourage quality curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on equity and equal access to courses students need to prepare for higher education or work. Emphasis on higher level thinking skills and application of learning to the real and the concrete world. Staff development should focus on staff needs which will support the needed improvements.

GOAL 4 - Improvement in schoolwide strategies that support the delivery of the instructional program.

The committee will emphasize the necessity of a school culture which views learning as pleasurable and important. Integral to this culture is a continuous focus on improvement as a process guided by systematic management, policy, and practice. Critical to the process is a link to the wider community which serves to support the schools goals for instructional excellence.

Because separate objectives remain for each agency despite the joint process, each has maintained separate criteria. Although they are different, both sets of criteria are mutually supportive.

WASC CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

A school must be evaluated upon the degree to which it is accomplishing its own stated objectives and how appropriate those objectives are. Fundamental to accreditation is the quality of the educational program experienced by the students. A school must provide evidence of an ongoing process for school improvement. The criteria are related to the following areas:

1. Philosophy, Goals, and Objectives
2. Organization
3. Student Support Services
4. Curricular Program
5. Co-Curricular Program
6. Staff
7. School Plant
8. Finance

SDE QUALITY CRITERIA

The State Department of Education has developed criteria in two major categories:

Schoolwide
1. The Culture of the School
2. Improvement Process
3. Instructional Practices
4. Integrated Skills
5. Special Needs
6. Students' Paths Through High School
7. Student Services

Curriculum
1. English/Language Arts
2. Foreighn Language
3. History/Social Science
4. Mathematics
5. Physical Education
6. Science
7. Visual and Performing Arts
8. Vocational-Technical Education

PURSUING EXCELLENCE PROCESS

Pursuing Excellence has three parts: the self-study, the visit, and the follow-up.

The self-study is overseen by a coordinator who is assisted by five school wide committees and each department committee. Each committee examines the school or department against the exemplars stated in the criteria. In addition to describing strengths, the committes must identify areas for improvement and action plans to address the major areas for improvement. Committees can call upon Curriculum Consultants drawn from a pool of experts based primarily in higher education to assist in developing the action plan.

The visiting committee serves as an external validation body. It assists the school in identifying strengths, areas for improvement, and in modifying the action plans and developing two priority action plans. The committee also recommends a term of accreditation to the Accrediting Commission for Schools.

The follow-up is overseen by a standing school committee whose primary charge is school improvement. It leads the school in further developing and implementing the action plans and the visiting committee's recommendations. Annual evaluations of the progress toward meeting the schools goals is essential. All schools must write a MidTerm Progress Report summarizing the school's improvement efforts, with particular attention to the makjor recommendations of the visiting committee. In the event a school was given a limited accreditation (less than six years), it must complete a Progress Report on all of the recommendations to the Commission and schedule a one-day revisit by a two members of the original visiting committee. The Revisit Report becomes the basis for determining the continuing accreditation status of the school.

Commentary on the Effectiveness of the Joint Process

The major strength of the new joint process is the breadth and depth of the assessment which results from the combined criteria. This element coupled with the added component of a priority action plan serves to establish evaluation of the school program as a prominent piece of the culture of the school. The process of self-study is reflective in nature. Educational institutions have been criticized widely for failing to provide faculty, staff, administration, and parents with the time and opportunity for reflective thinking about instructional programs. This process addresses that concern.

On the other hand, there is something inherently biased about self-evaluation. The self-study approach assumes that the school is the expert when it comes to examining its own program. Despite the presence of the visiting committee, the process relies heavily on internal versus external evaluation. Afterall, the visiting committee is on sight for only three and a half days. Furthermore, despite the fact that the visiting committee is composed of experienced educators, they are not trained professional inspectors like those found in

England, for instance. The process does carry the weight of compliance and accreditation. However, in the past, limited accreditation was rare. Recently it has become somewhat more common, which will serve to enhance the accountability function of the joint process.

However, in this country there seems to be a reluctance to criticize fellow educators. Unless an external as well as internal evaluation system based on a variety of assessment procedures is established, it will remain difficult to assess the results of California's school reforms at the school level.

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